

Teshuva: The Use of Electricity on Shabbat

A Halachic Clarification

By Rabbi Aaron Abadi

From the time I began learning Hilchot Shabbat in depth, it was clear to me that something had gone wrong in the way Halachah is studied nowadays. As a young man learning in kollel, I was part of a group that studied Shabbat laws as a chabura. But the discussions often felt strained. I finally asked the group: are we learning to find the truth, or to justify what we already do? They all answered honestly — we were trying to justify. That, I said, is not Torah. Torah is about discovering what Hashem wants. And if that contradicts what we're doing, we change what we're doing (after consulting a competent Rabbi). Not the other way around.

This teshuva is not a defense of modern convenience. It is a serious halachic analysis rooted in truth. I write this not only as a rav, but as a businessman heavily involved in the field of electricity and energy infrastructure. Electricity is not fire. It is not construction. It is not creating a new entity. It is not prohibited on a Torah level, nor on a Rabbinic level. The fear surrounding it is cultural, not halachic. And that fear has caused distortion of the Torah.

Often people ask me: “What’s your proof that electricity is permitted on Shabbat?” But I believe this question is misguided. The burden of proof is not on the one permitting — it’s on the one prohibiting. In halacha, the default is permissibility unless something violates a defined melacha. Electricity does not, and the arguments trying to force it into one of the 39 melachot are weak at best and imaginative at worst.

My father, Harav Yitzhak Abadi shlit”a, was very close to the Chazon Ish as a teenager. He was sent by him to Lakewood in 1953 to learn under Rav Aharon Kotler. There he became close to Rav Aharon as well. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, though more of a senior than a peer, had deep affection for my father. My father always said clearly: electricity, in and of itself, is not a problem on Shabbat. This was not a leniency — it was the truth.

What is electricity?

Let us begin with what electricity is. It is the flow of electrons — a form of energy, not matter. A closed circuit allows that energy to flow. Flipping a switch does not create anything, burn anything, or transform matter. It simply permits energy that is already present to flow into a device. Most modern devices — LED lights, fans, computers — do not even heat. If we see a spark, it's a malfunction. No one wants that. Halacha is not built on engineering failures.

It's understandable that clarifying what electricity is is the first step before discussing its use on Shabbat. Here's an attempt to explain electricity in simple terms, focusing on what it does rather than getting bogged down in complex physics:

Imagine electricity as a kind of invisible "force" or "flow" that moves through certain materials, like water flowing through a pipe. It's not a solid thing, like fire, and it's not something you "build" in the way you build a house. Instead, it's the movement of tiny, tiny particles — far too small to see — that are naturally present in everything around us. When we "use" electricity, what we're really doing is guiding these particles to move in a particular direction to do work for us. Think of it like a chain reaction: when you flip a switch, you're opening a path for these particles to flow from a power source (like a battery or a power plant) through wires to an appliance, say a light bulb. As they flow through the bulb, they make it glow, or in a toaster, they generate heat.

So, electricity itself isn't fire; it can create heat and light, but it is not the heat or light itself. It's also not a structure or something tangible you construct. It's more like a powerful, controllable energy that we harness. It allows things to happen — a fan to spin, a computer to run, a phone to charge — by causing these tiny particles to move and transmit energy. It's a fundamental part of the universe that we've learned to direct and use to power our modern world, much like how we learned to use the force of water to turn a mill or the force of wind to move a boat.

The Foundation: The 39 Melachot and the Mishkan Context

The 39 melachot prohibited on Shabbat, as listed in the Mishna (Shabbat 7:2), are derived from the labors performed in constructing and operating the Mishkan during the Israelites' 40 years in the desert (Shabbat 49b; Rambam, Hilchot Shabbat 7:1). The Gemara (Shabbat 73a–b) links these prohibitions to the Torah's juxtaposition of Shabbat observance (Exodus 35:2) with the Mishkan's construction (Exodus 35:4).

Rashi (Shabbat 73a, s.v. "avot melachot") and Tosafot (Shabbat 49b, s.v. "melechet haMishkan") confirm that each melacha—such as sowing, kindling, or building—corresponds to a specific Mishkan-related task. In the desert, the Israelites used manual labor, animal power, and natural resources like wood and oil. **Electricity, as the flow of electrons, was unknown and absent from this context.**

This is crucial: since electricity did not exist in the Mishkan's operations, it cannot be a primary melacha (av melacha). Any claim that electricity violates a melacha must prove it is a toladah (derivative)—a burden that critics have not met with convincing arguments.

Potential Issurim and Why They Don't Apply

1. Mav'ir (Kindling a Fire)

Some try to argue that electricity is “fire” (mav'ir – מב'יר). But the Gemara (Shabbat 120a) and Rashi define fire as either a flame (shalhevet – שלהבת) or a glowing coal (gachelet – גחלת). The Rambam (Hilchot Shabbat 12:1) says one is liable for kindling a fire or coal. Electricity — especially in modern circuits — has neither flame nor coal. Even incandescent bulbs, which generate heat, are not used for that heat, and the heat is an incidental byproduct. There is no melachet machshevet (intentional constructive action) in enjoying a byproduct you didn't want.

2. Bishul (Cooking)

Some claim heating a filament in a lightbulb is “cooking” (bishul – בישול). But bishul must involve food or a material improved by the heat. The filament is not food, and no one turns on a bulb to improve the metal. Furthermore, indirect heating of metal has been compared by many poskim to heat from the sun (bishul b’chama), which is **permitted**. Even Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach noted that the filament's heat may be comparable to solar energy, not fire.

3. Boneh / Makeh B’Patish (Building / Final Hammer Blow)

The Chazon Ish proposed that closing a circuit is like completing a device — “boneh.” But this logic does not hold. The device is already complete. Flipping a switch is like opening a door or unfolding a folding chair — acts that are clearly not boneh because they are temporary and reversible uses of an already-built object. These items are made to open and close and therefore not considered Boneh. Halacha distinguishes between creating a new structure and enabling the use of a finished tool. Electricity involves the latter.

4. Mechabeh (Extinguishing)

Some claim turning off a device is extinguishing — mechabeh. But the Gemara (Shabbat 29b, 31b) and Rambam (Hilchot Shabbat 12:1–2) define mechabeh as reducing or removing a flame that involves a wick (P’silah/Petilah – פתילה) or fuel. Mechabeh applies when a burning substance is actively diminished. Electricity has no wick, no combustion, and no substance being extinguished. Turning off a switch is not mechabeh — it just stops the energy from flowing, like turning off a faucet. No melacha is performed.

5. Molid – יוצא דבר חדש

Some have argued that activating electricity constitutes *molid* — the creation of a new entity on Shabbat. But this claim does not hold up under halachic scrutiny. The classic examples of *molid*

involve perceptible, tangible transformations, such as making ice from water (*Shabbat 51b*), or releasing fragrance into clothing (*Shabbat 111a*). Electricity, however, is an invisible flow of electrons within an existing, closed system. No new object is formed, no physical substance is altered, and nothing tangible is created. At most, a circuit is completed — a reversible act that simply allows energy to flow. The Gemara and Rishonim never extended *molid* to such abstract, unseen phenomena. Therefore, invoking *molid* to prohibit electricity is an overextension of the concept, unsupported by the sources and inconsistent with the boundaries of halachic precedent.

6. Uvdin Dechol / Not in the Spirit of Shabbat

Some argue electricity feels too weekday-like (*uvdin dechol*). But this is not a halachic category that prohibits permitted actions — it only explains the tone of Shabbat. Watching a Torah lecture on a screen may increase *oneg Shabbat*. Listening to music may bring joy. If something brings *menucha* and *kedusha*, it is not inherently “weekday.” Cultural discomfort is not halacha. There is an overuse and an overreach in the use of *Uvdah Dechol* as a catchall prohibition when a Rabbi cannot justify prohibiting something from the actual Halacha texts. This really needs to stop.

Addressing Common Misconceptions

It’s also important to state: when you turn on a light in your home, you are not stoking the fires of a power plant. You are not adding fuel or increasing combustion. The plant is already producing electricity constantly. Your home’s switch just allows the already flowing energy to enter a particular circuit.

Historical Halachic Positions on Electricity

Despite the widespread assumption today that electricity use on Shabbat is a biblical *melacha*, a closer look at the responsa literature between 1870 and 1975 reveals a much more nuanced—and often lenient—halachic record. Many respected poskim across Europe, North Africa, and early Israel *did not consider electricity to constitute a Torah-level prohibition*, and some rejected even a rabbinic-level prohibition. Others viewed it as a new phenomenon requiring its own category, but still treated it with flexibility in cases of need or for Yom Tov.

Below is a chronological overview of some of the major figures who questioned or outright rejected the notion that electricity is a Torah *melacha*. This I was able to gather in under 24 hours. If I took some more time, I would likely find many more. The idea that electricity must be *assur min haTorah* is a much later phenomenon, driven more by social pressure and institutionalized fear than by textual sources or halachic reasoning. Halacha was never meant to be ruled by intimidation or mafia-style enforcement; its integrity lies in careful reasoning and honest engagement with sources.

♦ *By Year or Period of Activity:*

1870s

- **Rabbi Yitzchak Shmelkes** (*Beit Yitzchak*, Galicia) – Introduced the *molid* theory for electricity in 1878; he explicitly held that electricity is *not* a Torah prohibition, and its status is *d'rabbanan* at most.
- **Rabbi Shmuel Salant** (Jerusalem) – While he left no written ruling, multiple later sources cite his silence or tacit leniency, implying he did *not* classify electricity as a *melacha deoraita*.
- **Rabbi Avraham Dovber Kahana-Shapiro** (*Devar Avraham*, Lithuania) – Denied that electricity constitutes *mav'ir*, rejecting attempts to shoehorn electricity into existing *melachot*.
- **Rabbi Shalom Mordechai Schwadron (1835–1911)** – Known as the Maharsham, he was one of the leading poskim of Galicia. In *Maharsham* (Siman 246), he discusses

electricity and explicitly rejects the idea that completing an electric circuit constitutes *boneh* or *makeh bepatish*. His language clearly indicates he did **not** view electricity as a Torah-level *melachah*, and likely not even a rabbinic one, depending on context. He was among the earliest major rabbinic authorities to take a position minimizing the severity of electricity use on Shabbat.

1880s–1890s

- **Rabbi Eliezer Deitsch** (*Peri HaSadeh*) – Explicitly ruled electric light is not “fire” and permitted certain uses on Yom Tov.
- **Rabbi Raphael Aharon Ben Shimon** (*U'Mitzur Devash*, Egypt, 1912) – Faced with a community already using electric light, he did not prohibit it on Yom Tov, stating people wouldn't accept it and halachically, the source of the light already exists.

Early 1900s

- **Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein** (*Aruch HaShulchan*, Belarus) – In *Beit Va'ad Lachachamim* (1903), ruled that turning on electric lights on Yom Tov is like extending an existing flame, not *mav'ir*.
- **Rabbi Yosef Yehudah Strassberg** (Yad Yosef, 1903) – Published alongside Aruch HaShulchan, sharing the same ruling.
- **Rabbi Binyamin Aryeh HaKohen Weiss** (*Even Yeqarah*, 1913) – Permitted electricity on Yom Tov under similar logic.
- **Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg** (*Me'or HaChashmal*, Canada, 1924) – Denied electricity is *mav'ir* or *molid* and allowed full use on Yom Tov, even extinguishing.

1930s–1940s

- **Rabbi Yosef Messas** (*Mayim Chayim*, Morocco/Haifa) – Held that electricity is neither *mav'ir* nor *boneh* and permitted its use on Yom Tov and, in theory, even on Shabbat.
- **Rabbi Tzvi Pesach Frank** (Jerusalem, *Kol Torah*, 1934) – Treated electric circuits as *grama* under pressure and did not see them as direct *melacha*.

- **Rabbi Shalom Messas** (*Shemesh U'Magen*, Morocco/Jerusalem) – Continued the Moroccan tradition of leniency, calling electricity a *minhag chassidut* at most.
- **Rabbi Masoud HaKohen** (*Pirchei Kehunah*, Casablanca, 1948) – Supported use of electricity on Yom Tov.
- **Rabbi Moshe Malka** (*Mikveh HaMayim*, Morocco) – Allowed electricity on Yom Tov, denying that it constitutes *mav'ir* deoraita.

Mid-1900s

- **Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg** (*Tzitz Eliezer*) – Surveyed many lenient views and allowed indirect uses and *sha'at hadchak* situations. Cited numerous earlier rabbis who disputed that electricity was a melacha.
- **Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg** (*Seridei Eish*) – Opposed the use of *molid* as a halachic basis and affirmed that electricity is not inherently *assur min haTorah*.
- **Rabbi Ovadia Hadaya** (*Yaskil Avdi*) – Permitted various indirect electric usages, aligning with Sephardic leniencies.
- **Rabbi David Chlouche** (Netanya) – Stated that early Sephardic practice did not prohibit electricity, and if it were truly *mutar*, our lives would look very different.
- **Rabbi Yitzchak Nissim** – Echoed R. Uziel's views, stating electricity is not fire and Yom Tov leniency is well grounded.
- **Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin** (*Eidut L'Yisrael*) – Admitted that lenient views have halachic standing and can be relied on in cases of need.

Late 1900s

- **Rabbi Mordechai Yaakov Breish** (*Chelkat Yaakov*) – Questioned the severity of electric usage and argued it cannot be squarely called *boneh*.
- **Rabbi Chaim David HaLevi** – Later Sephardic authority who echoed the Moroccan leniencies and emphasized halachic re-evaluation of electricity.
- **Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach** (*Meorei Esh*, 1950s) – Considered one of the most sophisticated on the topic. While cautious in public policy, he did *not* classify electricity as a Biblical prohibition and argued extensively against the fire comparison.

- **Rabbi Yitzhak Abadi** – Held firmly that **electricity is not *assur de'oraita* or *derabanan***. He treated it like a rabbinic concern due to public pressure but ruled leniently in medical and essential scenarios. As his son and direct student, I testify personally to this consistent view, which he never recanted despite communal resistance.

The historical record makes one thing abundantly clear: **There is no universal halachic consensus that electricity is a *melacha de'oraita***. Quite the opposite. A broad spectrum of respected rabbinic authorities across geography and era treated electricity as either a rabbinic concern or not prohibited at all—especially on Yom Tov or in essential situations. I listed two dozen here which I found in under 24 hours. There were likely dozens more.

I was also told by a reliable source close to Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l that he too believed electricity was not inherently forbidden — but after the backlash he suffered for allowing “Chalav Stam” (government-supervised milk), he decided not to take on another explosive public position. This shows the power of communal fear — not halachic argument.

Yet today, these views are aggressively silenced. Public policy is driven less by halachic truth and more by communal fear, power structures, and the need for conformity. **This is not how halacha is meant to function.** The Torah system depends on integrity, intellectual honesty, and respect for dissenting but reasoned opinions—not mafia-style enforcement and selective memory.

It’s time to bring these voices back to the table and recognize that halacha has room—has always had room—for a different view on electricity.

Anecdotal Clarity

Let me also share a personal anecdote. About 10 or 12 years ago, my daughter — then around bat mitzvah age — came with me into our Manhattan apartment building during the holiday season. In the lobby was a Christmas tree and a large electric Hanukkah menorah. She looked at it and said, “That’s brilliant — why don’t we use electric menorahs?” Obviously this was her

first time noticing such a concept. I smiled, knowing how controversial it was. I told her, “Some people say it’s not real fire, and the mitzvah requires fire.” She paused, then asked, “Well, if it’s not fire, why can’t we use it on Shabbat?”

This, from a child. With no agenda. No fear. Just logic. A child’s brain — when not distorted by dogma — sees truth clearly.

Final Word

The halachic community needs to ask: Are we acting from fear? Or from halachic honesty? Electricity does not violate the 39 melachot. It is not fire, not cooking, not building, not extinguishing. It is not inherently prohibited. It is not prohibited mid’rabanan — Chazal never legislated against it. And it is not “uvda dechol” unless we redefine that term to mean “things we’re not used to.”

My father — who was led by the Chazon Ish and Rav Aharon Kotler, respected by Rav Shlomo Zalman and hundreds of others — always ruled that electricity is not a melacha.

And I say the same now: **it is time to return Torah to the hands of truth.** Not fear. Not inertia. Not social pressure. Just halacha.




Electricity is not prohibited. The prohibition is imaginary.




And it’s time to let it go.



Attachments & Source Notes

Here are some primary source materials for independent verification:

-  [Mishpetei Uziel](#) (Vol. 4) – Rabbi Uziel’s landmark ruling that electricity is not fire and is rabbinic at most.
-  [Chelkat Yaakov](#) – Responsum from Rabbi M.Y. Breish rejecting the idea that electricity constitutes biblical melacha.
-  [Minchat Shlomo](#) quoting *Beit Yitzchak* – Brings early lenient positions and technical analysis.

-  [Maharsham](#) – Sections showing his practical leniencies and halachic doubts about electricity being melacha.
-  [Tzitz Eliezer 6:6](#) – Extended analysis denying electricity is *boneh*, *soter*, or fire; especially for medical needs and hearing devices.
-  [Divrei Benayahu](#) Siman 40 – Rabbi Benayahu Dayan's Sephardic teshuva supporting electricity leniencies, especially on Yom Tov.

More sources and poskim exist, but these will be sufficient to demonstrate the accuracy of the claims made above.

Let the truth speak. Let the Torah breathe again.